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Commentary

## The Creeping Conformity—and Potential Risks—of Contemporary Urbanism

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### Abstract

As new urbanism has come to dominate planning, it has contributed to new kinds of design conformity. The recent emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the potential risks generated by some of new urbanism's key principles, such as higher densities and transit orientation intended to enhance efficiency and sustainability.

### Keywords

conformity; density; form-based codes; gentrification; neoliberalism; urban design

### Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “New Urbanism: From Exception to Norm—The Evolution of a Global Movement” edited by Susan Moore (University College London, UK) and Dan Trudeau (Macalester College, USA).

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### 1. The New Planning Paradigm

In planning, as in science, theoretical paradigms tend to dominate disciplines until the fit between theory and evidence becomes so contorted that practitioners adopt a new paradigm (see Kuhn, 1962). We witnessed such a shift happen in planning in recent decades as new-urbanism-smart-growth-sustainability supplanted the earlier radiant-garden-city-neighborhood-unit-modernist model of urban development. The dominance of particular planning principles and practices—regardless of the paradigm in place—leads to conformity, whether in suburbs (Grant, 2002; Harris, 2004) or in urban centers (Molina, 2015). Moreover, each paradigm generates unique implications and risks that become increasingly evident through time.

Principles associated with new urbanism theory (mixed use, high-quality design, compact form, higher densities, transit-orientation) have become ubiquitous (Fulton, 2017), although contemporary planning documents are more likely to favor the language of sustainability or smart growth. New urbanism principles and practices have proven well-suited to neoliberal times, where real-estate finance has become critical to urban economies (Smith, 2002; Weber, 2010),

and large-scale master-planning increasingly dominates growth areas. New urbanism's early promises of authenticity, civility, and meaningful citizen engagement (Katz, 1993; Krieger, 1992) appear less often today than calls for complete communities, human-scaled urban design, walkability, and form-based codes to streamline development (Tachieva, 2010).

### 2. Emerging Risks

In dominating urban planning practice, new urbanism has generated unique risks. For instance, cities that adopt design guidelines and form-based codes that promote intensification and attractive streetscapes thereby enhance the value of urban land—to the benefit of owners, but at the potential cost of renters. Design codes are entrenching contemporary aesthetics in ways that generate new kinds of conformity in building morphology and spatial patterning and that may be hard to change in future. Just as earlier garden city prescriptions created sprawling suburban landscapes, contemporary rules that remove set-backs or encourage narrow towers produce homogeneous urban cores and suburban ‘town centers.’ By encouraging—or in some cases requiring—commercial uses at street level in downtown buildings,

cities can over-produce commercial space that then may remain vacant for months or years (Grant, Abbott, Taylor, & Zhu, 2018). While theorists talk about including an admixture of affordable units in new projects (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2000), in the absence of significant government intervention and investment, the market rarely meets the demand (Goetz, 2013). The kinds of urban environments being produced appeal to subsets of the population—especially Millennials and affluent empty-nesters—but may not meet the needs or means of others. The result of the kind of ‘revitalization’ or ‘renewal’ underway in many cities adopting new urbanism practices and principles with panache is often continuing or intensifying residential segregation by income, household type, age, and ethnicity (Trudeau & Kaplan, 2016).

The Congress for the New Urbanism (2020) proclaims that “New Urbanism has transformed deteriorating public housing into livable mixed-income neighborhoods,” yet critics note that programs employing new urbanism practices removed thousands of affordable units (Goetz, 2013; Vale & Shamsuddin, 2018) and stimulated gentrification (Clark & Negrey, 2017). Places built according to new urbanism principles are beautiful and walkable, but far from affordable, diverse, or accessible (Grant, 2006).

Some planners recognized the benefits of compact form and increasing urban densities as early as the 1970s,

as Jane Jacobs’ (1961) ideas about dense cities gained popularity and the environmental movement promoted eco-communities and then sustainable development (Bookchin, 1977; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Major cities in Europe, Asia, and Canada pursued intensification policies long before new urbanism theory arrived. As the commitment to greater densities became more entrenched with the influence of new urbanism, though, intensification transformed from being a means to greater efficiencies and affordability to an end in itself, with growing densities and high-rise towers emblematic of cities’ competitive success (Kipfer & Keil, 2002; Rutland, 2010). Efforts to densify urban areas using popular new urbanism strategies contribute to a creeping global design conformity unique to the early 21st century (Figure 1), while promoting what some call ‘town cramming’ may generate unwelcome risks. The emergence of new infectious diseases—whether Ebola in Africa, or coronaviruses in China—reminds us of the potential risks of dense urban living that we had the comfort to overlook for many decades. Linked to each other through global supply chains and international air travel, high-density urban environments are vulnerable to the rapid transmission of infections. During the 2020 Covid-19 outbreak many cities closed public transportation systems, retail environments, and workplaces. Parks, playgrounds, trails, beaches, public squares, libraries,



**Figure 1.** Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada: The plan called for new urbanism principles to increase suburban densities, but the results are repetitious. Source: Photo by author.

cafes, and other ‘third places’ vital to urban ‘livability’ became off-limits to urban dwellers who had access to precious little private space. Studies of the 1918–19 influenza pandemic suggested that higher-density areas experienced higher relative population loss (Chandra, Kassens-Noor, Kulijanin, & Vertalka, 2013). As some of the world’s largest cities found themselves hit hard by coronavirus, Rosenthal (2020) argued that “Density Is New York City’s Big ‘Enemy.’” Although effective public health strategies can mitigate risks, high-density living faces clear challenges.

### 3. A Paradigm for the Times

By defining the public interest as good-quality urban form ensured through the application of pre-approved design codes, the new urbanism streamlined planning and development in ways that have made planning easier for practitioners—both for planners and for developers. Where local residents may have once had the right to appeal zoning and planning decisions, in recent decades many jurisdictions have significantly limited third-party appeal rights (Alfasi, 2018; Ellis, 2006). While the reduced ‘red tape’ reinvigorated the ability of cities to function effectively as what Molotch (1976) called “urban growth machines,” legislative and procedural changes undermined or removed the right of citizens to influence outcomes. Thus, new urbanism has been strongly linked with the rebalancing of power in the city: away from residents (accused of NIMBYism) and towards developers and planning practitioners (recast as ‘city builders’).

In sum, over the last several decades new urbanism became an important force in making more beautiful urban environments with more efficient transportation networks and services. It proved a sympathetic design and planning strategy for a period dominated by neoliberal philosophies and a rising creative class. In practice, though, it generated negative implications and risks that have become more apparent. If Kuhn’s (1962) observations about the history of science offer an appropriate model of how theory changes, then we may expect to see increasing critiques of the paradigm over time, and eventually new approaches to planning beginning to appear as urban planners look for appropriate strategies and options for contemporary and future challenges. The combined contemporary crises of climate change, infectious disease, and political unrest are forcing attention on the need for planning to reassert a commitment to public health, social equity, and environmentally-responsible local solutions. Western towns facing chronic fire risks need different planning and design options than coastal villages experiencing sea level rise or than the urban fringe of growing global cities. In a future where planners recognize that context matters, textbook solutions producing creeping conformity may become a historical footnote.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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